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ABSTRACT

The University of Great Falls (UGF), in Montana, operated a distance learning system called Telecom, which combined video-taped instruction with weekly scheduled on-line telephone discussions between class members and instructors. At the site at the Montana State Prison for Men, Deer Lodge, Montana, the primary users were inmates. However, termination of the government guaranteed loan program, elimination of Pell Grants, and other funding difficulties led to a decision by the University to close the Deer Lodge site at the end of the spring semester 1997. In an effort to obtain State funding by demonstrating a concrete benefit of the program, UGF undertook a study of all the male offenders who participated in UGF's Telecom program between July 1, 1984 and June 30, 1995 to determine if the program reduced recidivism. The study included a literature review and used as the control group the general population at the Deer Lodge prison. Findings suggested that: (1) mere participation by offenders in the Telecom program did not result in a lower rate of recidivism; in fact, inmates taking more than 32 credits had much higher recidivism rates than those taking fewer than 32 credits; (2) grade point average may be an indicator of recidivist tendency, with those earning higher grade point averages showing low rates of recidivism; and (3) if financial aid were provided only to inmates eligible for release within a relatively short period, provision of such a program would probably reduce recidivism. (Contains 27 references.) (MAH)

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LEARNING THEIR LESSON: THE IMPACT ON RECIDIVISM OF PROVIDING COLLEGE COURSES TO INMATES

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Great Falls (UGF) offers courses via Telecom, a distance learning system which combines video-taped instruction with weekly scheduled on-line telephone discussions between members of the class and the instructor. The system currently utilizes established sites in twenty-one cities in Montana and Canada. Videotapes and other course materials are sent to the sites and each site is connected to UGF via an open telephone line.

In 1980, a site was established at the Montana State Prison for men at Deer Lodge, Montana. While the site is open to both staff and inmates, the primary users are inmates. Until the Fall Semester 1992, when federally guaranteed loans were no longer available to inmates, students primarily relied on federal government loans and grants to cover the cost of tuition and books. After the elimination of the government guaranteed loan program, the University of Great Falls made up the loss of the federally guaranteed student loan program by directly loaning inmates "replacement" funds to cover the expense for up to six credits per semester. However, the inmate had to be previously enrolled, maintain a minimum cumulative grade point of 2.0, and have a discharge date no later than the year 2,000.

The net result was that inmates not previously enrolled

were not allowed to begin attending classes and the site was doomed to extinction. This end of the program was hastened by the elimination of Pell Grants beginning with the Spring Semester 1995. Currently, the University is likewise making up the loss of the Pell Grants by directly loaning "replacement" funds to student inmates currently enrolled with no limit on credits but has scheduled the closing of the Deer Lodge site at the end of the Spring Semester 1997. During the Spring Semester 1992, prior to the elimination of the guaranteed loan program, there were 46 students taking a total of 361 credits. Currently, there are only 9 students taking a total of 28 credits.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Several members of the UGF community believe the elimination of the college educational opportunities offered via Telecom at the prison is a loss to both inmates and to students at other sites, especially criminal justice majors, who benefitted from the interaction with the inmates by gaining a better understanding of the inmates as convicted felons and as people. To continue the program, it would be necessary to obtain funds to replace the federal funds. UGF is unable to finance the program. Consequently, the only other player is the state government. The current mind set of taxpayers and their representatives is such that programs that benefit inmates in intangible ways will not be

funded. If it were possible to demonstrate a concrete benefit to the program, it might be possible to obtain state funding. As stated by Duguid (1982), "(t)he ultimate success of a prison program is, of course, its success or apparent success in inhibiting reincarceration". Consequently, a study to determine if the program reduced recidivism was undertaken.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

By 1987, ninety-two percent of the states had some form of post-secondary correctional education programming (Taylor 1993; Ryan and Woodward 1987). However, since the elimination of federally guaranteed student loans in 1992, 20 USC 1070a (b)(8), and Pell Higher Education Grants in 1994, 20 USC 1091(b)(5), this number is surely in decline.

The elimination of federal assistance for inmates engaged in post-secondary education was a response to the ever increasing public perception that inmates have it too easy and should be punished rather than benefitting at the expense of law abiding students (Tootoonchi 1993). This attitude is, in part, due to a misunderstanding of the Pell Grant program in regard to the number of prisoners utilizing it and the erroneous conclusion that qualified non-prisoners were unable to obtain Pell Grants because of inmate participation (Taylor 1994). Additionally, the case for college education of inmates has been hampered by the

lack of conclusive results of studies on the impact of college education utilizing inmate recidivism as the measure of program value (Knepper 1990).

While the results may not be conclusive, they are indicative. Gerber and Fritsch (1993) thoroughly reviewed the studies that addressed inmate college education and recidivism and concluded that "most studies report an inverse relationship between college education and recidivism". This review included ten studies which reported an inverse relationship between college education and recidivism (Ayers et al. 1980; Blackburn 1981; Duguid 1981; Hagerstown Junior College 1982; Holloway and Moke 1986; Langenbach et al. 1990; NYS, Docs 1991; NYS, Docs 1992; O'Neil 1990; Thorpe et al. 1984) and four studies which did not find a relationship between college education and recidivism (Knepper 1990; Linden et al. 1984; Lockwood 1991; Wolf and Sylves 1981). Taylor (1992) refers to five additional studies which support the hypothesis that college education reduces recidivism (Thomas 1974; Thompson 1976; Gaither 1976; Chase and Dickover 1983; Barker 1986).

It should be recognized that the research into the effect of inmate college education programs on recidivism is not without critics. Studies are often flawed by methodological weaknesses (Gerber et al. 1993; Lockwood 1991) such as uncontrolled variables (Langenbach et al. 1990; Linden and Perry 1982) and the failure to define recidivism in a consistent way (Rienerth 1991; Gaither 1976). Nevertheless, the significance of the correlation

between reduced recidivism and college programs for inmates often demonstrated by applicable studies cannot be ignored. Likewise, the failure of all studies to demonstrate an inverse relationship between inmate college programs and recidivism cannot be overlooked. Further studies need to be conducted to determine if the inverse relationship between inmate college education programs and recidivism does exist and to determine the reason why the results of past studies have not been consistent.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to determine whether UGF's Telecom program at Montana State Prison for men reduced recidivism, the general population was used as the control group. Data for the general population was obtained from the Montana Department of Corrections which maintains data on the number of offenders who are released, either through parole or discharge, and those who are returned to the prison within three years of release, either for a parole violation or for a new offense. The nature of the data collected by the Montana Department of Corrections was partially responsible for the definition of recidivism used in this study.

For the purpose of this study, recidivism is defined as a return to prison within three years after release for a new offense or for a parole violation. It is recognized that one of

the problems encountered in analyzing recidivism studies is the lack of a standardized definition of recidivism. Reinerth (1991), in her study on the various definitions of recidivism, found over eleven different ways recidivism had been defined by thirty different professional sources. It should also be noted that the Montana Department of Corrections definition of recidivism is different than that used in this study.

All of the male offenders who participated in UGF's Telecom program from Spring 1981 to Spring 1995 were identified from files maintained by UGF's Telecom office. The Prison's Information Office was provided those participating offender's names and reviewed the prison's records to determine whether the offender had been released or not. If released, the date of release was provided and, if returned, the date of return was indicated.

The Department of Corrections adopted a new database and record keeping system beginning with fiscal year 1984. Because of a concern that the data colled prior to that date was unreliable, this study only addressed inmates released after the implementation of the new database and system. Since the recidivism definition utilized considers offenders who were returned to prison within three years of release as recidivists, only offenders who were released prior to fiscal year 1992 were studied. This served to also eliminate any potential skewing of results due to the elimination of federally insured loans for prisoners beginning with the Fall Semester 1992.

Consequently, all inmates taking Telecom courses who were released between July 1, 1984 and June 30, 1992 were studied. Seventy-nine inmates were in that category. The recidivism rate for those offenders was compared to that of the general population released during the same period (3,669). Transcripts for the student inmates were obtained from UGF's Registrar. Analyses were then performed to determine if the number of credits taken or grade point received prior to release affected the recidivism rate.

It is recognized that there are numerous limitations on a study of this nature. Variables such as age, criminal record, intelligence quotient, pre-incarceration education and employment, and post-release education and employment were not considered. A study of those variables might be enlightening. However, unless participation in a prison college education program, like UGF's Telecom program, can be shown to have an inverse relationship on recidivism for the participating offenders and thus an overall financial savings for society, it is unlikely that funding for the program could be justified to state legislators.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mere participation by offenders in UGF's Telecom program did not have an inverse effect on recidivism - see Table One. The recidivism rate for offenders released from Montana

State Prison for Men (MSP) between July 1, 1984 and June 30, 1992 was 28 percent (3669 released and 1039 returned). The recidivism rate for UGF Telecom participants released during the same period was 35 percent (79 released with 28 returned). This result contradicts the majority of studies considering the relationship between college education and recidivism (Gerber et al. 1993). To minimize concern over sample size, the recidivism rate for UGF Telecom participants was also calculated for the period January 1, 1981 to June 30, 1992. The recidivism rate for that period was 30 percent (103 released with 31 returned). Regardless of the period considered, participation in UGF's Telecom program did not result in a lower recidivism rate.

Perhaps one of the causes for this result is that offenders serving short periods of incarceration, due to their criminal history and who would be expected to have lower rates of recidivism, were not incarcerated long enough to take advantage of the program. However, that would not explain the discrepancy between this study's results and that of many other studies. That discrepancy may be due to the utilization of different definitions of recidivism, different methodologies, or the nature of the college programs studied.

In order to determine if academic factors effected recidivism, both the number of credits taken and the grade point received prior to release were analyzed to determine if any relationship exists. Table Two records the result of the comparison of credits taken with recidivism. The credit

breakdown utilized is generally by semester. UGF requires 128 credits to graduate or 16 credits per semester to graduate under a traditional four year graduation plan. Since many offenders composed the first semester category, that category was divided in half. There were only minor differences in recidivism between those enrolling for 0-8 credits (34%), 9-16 credits (31%), or 17-32 credits (29%). However, those inmates taking more credits had much higher recidivism rates: 32-48 credits (40%); 49-64 credits (80%); and 65-80 credits (100%). This surprising result is either due to the small number of inmates taking the higher number of credits or the fact that an inmate incarcerated long enough to accumulate a large number of credits probably has a significant criminal history which would increase his likelihood of returning to prison.

Table Three records the result of the comparison of grade point average obtained with recidivism. Offenders obtaining a grade point average of below 2.0 had a very high rate of recidivism (42%). While inmates obtaining a grade point average of 2.0 or above, had a significantly low rate of recidivism (15%). An analysis of variance was done to compare the mean grade point of recidivists and non-recidivists. A significant difference was found in the mean grade point averages of these two groups ($P < .02$). This suggests that grade point average can be an indicator of recidivist tendency. Consequently, if financial assistance was provided to inmates to begin a college program but only continued if a 2.0 grade point average was

achieved, the college program would successfully reduce recidivism. The data included in Table Two also suggests that if financial aid was provided only to inmates who would be eligible for release within a relatively short period, recidivism would be further reduced.

This premise would have to be further studied to ascertain its validity. Even if this finding is valid, it may be due to the individual characteristics of UGF's Telecom program. Assuming its validity, it would still be necessary to determine its cost effectiveness. Would the lower rate of recidivism for those inmates who obtain a grade point average of 2.0 plus be worth the expense of educating them in addition to the expense for the initial attempt at a college eduction by those inmates failing to obtain a 2.0 grade point. Out of the 79 inmates studied, 59 did not obtain a 2.0 grade point prior to release.

In considering the cost effectiveness of a college program for inmates, modified as suggested herein, the cost of the education should be weighed against the cost to society of having offenders on the streets and the cost of incarcerating inmates. Taylor (1992), in discussing the financial loss to society caused by the typical offender, cites Zedlewski (1987) estimate of $430,100 per year and Zimring and Hawkins (1988) estimate of $46,000 per year. Assuming lack of recidivism equates to lack of criminal behavior, even a minimal reduction in recidivism would outweigh the cost of the college program. This is especially true if incarceration costs are the $25,800 per year national

average cited by Zedlewski (1987). For each year one ex-offender remains crime free and out of prison the savings, depending on the estimates used, range from $114,800 ($25,800 + $46,000) to $455,900 ($25,800 + $430,100). Either of those amounts would pay for a significant number of students participating in a college program. At UGF, a three credit course costs $630 for tuition and approximately $70 for books or a total of $700. The lower estimate previously mentioned of $114,000 would pay for 164 courses or 492 credits. The higher estimate of $455,900 would pay for 651 courses or 1,953 credits.

CONCLUSION

The initial conclusion of this study was that UGF's Telecom program offering college courses to inmates did not lower the overall recidivism rate of participants. That conclusion is valid but does not tell the entire story. As discussed above, the program could be structured so as to lower recidivism, resulting in a financial savings to society. To provide a continuing college education to any and all inmates without appropriate restrictions, is to invite failure. It is not worth the expense. Additionally, it should be mentioned that during the period from Spring 1981 through Spring 1995, 57 of the 216 inmate participants in UGF's Telecom program during that period had not even been released from the prison. While some of those

57 may be on the verge of release, such a high number of long term inmates enrolled in college courses, usually at the public's expense, cannot be justified.

With proper design, college education programs for inmates can be cost effective ways of combatting recidivism. As Lockard stated in 1974, "Simply, and aside from humanitarian concerns-it is cheaper in the not-so-long run to pay for effective anti-recidivism measures than to finance law enforcement, justice administration, and penal services" (Taylor 1992). Hopefully, the action the U.S. Congress took in eliminating funding for inmate college students can be counter balanced through state or private funding for college programs which lower recidivism. If a compelling enough case can be made that reformatted college educational programs can clearly reduce recidivism and benefit the taxpayer, a renewal of Federal funding is even a possibility.

TABLE 1

RECIDIVISM RATES OF STUDY GROUPS

STUDY GROUPS	# OF OFFENDERS RELEASED	# OF OFFENDERS RETURNED WITHIN 3 YEARS	% OF RECIDIVISM
ALL INMATES RELEASED FROM MONTANA STATE PRISON (DEER LODGE) DURING 7/1/84-6/30/92	3,669	1,039	28
ALL INMATES PARTICIPATING IN UGF TELECOM PROGRAM RELEASED FROM MONTANA STATE PRISON (DEER LODGE) DURING 7/1/84-6/30/92	79	28	35

TABLE 2

CREDITS COMPLETED AND RELATIONSHIP WITH RECIDIVISION

CREDITS	# OF OFFENDERS RELEASED	# OF OFFENDERS RETURNED WITHIN 3 YEARS	% OF RECIDIVISION
0-8	38	12	34
9-16	16	5	31
17-32	14	4	29
33-48	5	2	40
49-64	5	4	80
65-80	1	1	100
81-128	0	0	0
TOTAL	79	28	35

TABLE 3

GRADE POINT AVERAGE AND RELATIONSHIP WITH RECIDIVISION

GRADE POINT AVERAGE	# OF OFFENDERS RELEASED	# OF OFFENDERS RETURNED WITHIN 3 YEARS	% OF RECIDIVISION
0-9	28	10	36
1.0-1.9	31	15	48
2.0-2.9	13	3	23
3.0-4.0	7	0	0
TOTAL	79	28	35

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